

Understanding the Dimensions of Culture: Learning to Relate to Hispanic Employees

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The number of Hispanic employees working in agricultural and horticultural businesses in the Northeast has increased dramatically in recent years. This increase in people from Latin American cultures has introduced change into our workplaces and our communities.

Decades ago the United States was referred to as a “melting pot.” As groups of people of different nationalities, ethnicities, races, and religions came to this country they came together and blended to eventually resemble one another. Today, the term “salad bowl” is often used to reflect the mixture of people in American society. We are all one population but with individual identities. Immigrants today often have the expectation of maintaining their cultural identity while participating in the American way of life.

As agricultural and horticultural employers become familiar with the Hispanic workforce, cross-cultural understanding is essential to building healthy interpersonal relationships and strong communities. It is also essential in the workplace where supervisors find it important to take cultural values and beliefs into consideration as they manage their employees.

Culture is defined as the set of values, attitudes, and beliefs that members come to share. Culture guides how a group of people perceives the world and how life is organized and experienced. Each person within a culture possesses learned ways of finding meaning in their actions and experiences. Culture is not genetic; it is learned from one’s social environment.

Hofstede’s Four Dimensions of Culture

In 1980, Geert Hofstede, a scholar and researcher from the Netherlands, introduced a model proposing four dimensions of culture. He defined a dimension as an aspect of culture that can be measured relative to other cultures. He suggested that people carry “mental programs” which develop in the family and in early childhood and are reinforced in a person’s organizations and community. Hofstede further suggested that these mental programs include a component of national culture and are expressed in an individual’s values.

Hofstede’s dimensions of culture were based on a worldwide survey of over 116,000 employees in a large United States multinational company. He named the four dimensions:

- Power Distance
- Collectivism vs. Individualism
- Femininity vs. Masculinity
- Uncertainty Avoidance

Hofstede’s dimensions of culture are often used to explain different ways of structuring organizations, different motivations of people within organizations, and different issues people and organizations face within society. By developing an understanding of the dimensions of culture, small business managers can improve their ability to relate to and supervise their Hispanic employees.

Power Distance

Power distance is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is not distributed equally. When power distance in

a society is high, people believe that everyone has their rightful place and they understand that not everyone is treated equally. When power distance is low people believe that everyone should have equal rights and the opportunity to change their position in society.

While the following definitions reflect high and low power distance, it is likely that most workplaces will be between these two extremes with elements of both. In high power distance societies, people believe that there should be a well-defined order of inequality and everyone has their rightful place. In Latin American and other cultures where power distance is high, the following values, beliefs, and characteristics often prevail:

- There are large income differences in society.
- Those in authority exercise absolute power.
- Those in authority are respected and not questioned.
- Superiors consider subordinates as different from themselves.
- The ideal boss is autocratic and paternalistic.
- There is a tendency to accept one's place in society.

In low power distance societies, people believe that everyone should have equal access to money and opportunity. In the United States and other cultures where power distance is low, the following values, beliefs, and characteristics often prevail:

- Belief that everyone should have equal rights.
- Belief that subordinates are people like me.

- Relatively small income differentials in society.
- Belief that all should have equal access to money and opportunity.

Employers of Hispanic workers often observe that their employees are very respectful, especially of their supervisors and the business owners they work for. Further, Hispanic workers accept authority in the workplace and often do not challenge it. These attributes likely stem from values found in their high power distance culture.

Collectivism vs. Individualism

Individualism is defined as the extent to which people prefer to take care of themselves and their immediate families, remaining independent from groups and organizations. In individualist cultures, such as the United States, common characteristics include:

- Interests of the individual prevail over interests of the group.
- Children are taught to be independent.
- Individuals tend to take care of themselves rather than relying on groups.

In individualist societies, common beliefs regarding work include:

- Work goals include personal time, freedom, and challenge.
- Individuals see themselves as somewhat independent of the organization.
- People are managed as individuals.

Collectivism refers to the extent to which people from very early ages are integrated into strong cohesive "in groups." The "in group" becomes the major source of one's identity and is viewed as the only protection

against the hardships of life. The “in group” is generally comprised of one’s family and close friends and loyalty to the group is expected. In collectivist cultures such as those found in Latin America, family and relationships are very important. Common societal characteristics include:

- Financial support of family is important and expected.
- Sense of belonging is intense yet limited to family and close friends.
- People who are not family or close friends are often mistrusted.

In collectivist cultures, common beliefs regarding work include:

- Interaction at work is important and expected.
- At work, training and effective use of skills are emphasized.
- Employees tend to be dependent on the organization.
- Management of groups is emphasized.
- Relationships prevail over tasks.
- Role of the manager to support the group.

U.S. employers report many examples of collectivist behaviors in their Hispanic employees. The workers send money to family in their home country, they help each other find jobs, they work together as a team, and they help train newcomers to the job. Many of these traits can be very beneficial in the workplace and skilled managers can use these traits to create a supportive team work environment.

Masculinity vs. Femininity

Hofstede’s work suggests that each culture recognizes some behavior as more closely identified with males and some behaviors more closely identified with females. While gender roles vary from one society to another there are common themes among most countries.

In cultures ranked high in masculinity, managers are more likely to be concerned with task accomplishment than nurturing social relationships. In masculine societies motivation is more likely to be based on the acquisition of money than the quality of life. Leaders in masculine cultures are more likely to emphasize bottom line profits.

Conversely, feminine cultures tend to take more interest in the employee’s well being and demonstrate concern for social values for men and women. Countries which tend to have more masculine traits include the United States, Japan, and Ireland. Countries with more feminine values include Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Most countries indicate moderately high or moderately low masculinity tendencies. There are very few extremes. In Latin American countries, we see a combination of both masculine and feminine traits within the culture and in the workplace. Characteristics commonly thought of as masculine traits include:

- Aggressiveness and combativeness.
- Ambition and very hard work are driven by necessity.
- Emphasis on material possessions.

Characteristics commonly thought of as feminine traits include:

- Emphasis on people and warm relationships.
- Sensitivity to insult induces face saving behavior.

- Public criticism is considered unacceptable.
- Tendency to appreciate a friendly rather than a competitive workplace.
- Tendency to avoid upsetting the boss.

Some employers report that the feminine traits found in Hispanic cultures often show themselves in the workplace. This is especially true regarding issues such as public criticism and sensitivity to insult. Effective employers respond by fostering an environment of respect for their Hispanic employees.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened or uncomfortable dealing with uncertain or unknown factors. In some societies, high levels of uncertainty can create extreme levels of anxiety. Anxiety in this case is defined as the state of being uneasy or worried about what may happen. In response to the anxiety over uncertainty, societies often respond in three ways: they create laws, they embrace religion, and they adopt technology. Laws help to establish norms of behavior for the members of society providing more security. By embracing religion people reduce anxiety by believing “my fate is in the hands of God.” The adoption of technology helps to reduce accidents or disasters, making the population feel more safe and secure.

Examples of countries exhibiting high uncertainty avoidance include: Mexico, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Peru, and Japan. Examples of countries exhibiting low uncertainty avoidance are the United States, Norway, Great Britain, Sweden, and Denmark.

The following characteristics are common in high uncertainty avoidance societies:

- Many precise laws and rules.

- Citizen protest repressed.
- Conservatism.
- Law and order.
- Religious, political, and ideological fundamentalism.
- Intolerance.
- Less showing of emotions.

Characteristics common in low uncertainty avoidance societies, such as the United States, include:

- Few general laws and rules.
- Citizen protest acceptable.
- Tolerance.
- Moderation.
- No persecution for different beliefs.
- More showing of emotions.

Effective managers in high uncertainty avoidance societies provide job security, a great amount of written rules and procedures, and opportunities to decrease uncertainty through consensus building. People from high uncertainty avoidance cultures look for structure in their institutions and relationships, which tends to make events more clear and predictable. There is an emotional need for rules and structured situations, and effective managers make an effort to provide this. For example, employers report that Hispanic employees want to be given a work routine and prefer to have that routine remain the same for an extended period of time.

Managerial Implications of Culture

Small business managers who have experience supervising Hispanic employees report that learning to supervise employees

from another culture is a gradual process. Cross-cultural understanding is essential for effective cross-cultural supervision.

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The managerial implications of culture are best understood by considering the importance of core values. Managers and supervisors should consider the following implications of culture:

- Culture has a strong influence on a person's core values.
- People work to obtain what they value; for example, physical needs, lifestyle, and self-esteem.
- Values shape attitudes and beliefs about work including success, wealth, survival, authority, equity, and competition.
- Values govern how we wish to be treated and how we treat others.

Managers who understand these implications of culture are in a better position to relate to and effectively supervise their employees.

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